

DNR@WORK

BRANSON WILLIAMS

Fisheries Biologist

By Lauren Dorrill



For Natural Resource Biologist Branson Williams, a career outside was, well, the natural path.

"I grew up fishing, hunting, playing in the woods," Branson says. "My father was also a biologist and my mother was a science teacher. I think it would have been surprising if I *hadn't* pursued environmental work in some aspect."

After earning a Bachelor of Science from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Branson went on to pursue a master's degree in Marine Science from the College of William and Mary. A true outdoorsman who is happiest outside, "working with fish and getting dirty," he reeled in something of a dream job with DNR.

Branson works out of the Southern Region Inland Fisheries office, where it's his goal to enhance freshwater fishing opportunities for recreational anglers. He spends much of his time monitoring largemouth bass and other game fish, as well as the invasive blue catfish and northern snakehead, in the tidal freshwater portions of the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers and smaller lakes and ponds.

He conducts these surveys, primarily from an electrofishing boat. A generator on the boat applies a current to the water, temporarily stunning the fish, which are then measured, weighed and sometimes taken back to the lab for further analysis.

From the number of fish stunned in an outing, he is able to determine population increases or decreases based on historical data.

One of his most memorable experiences on the job came while electrofishing just south of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge on the Potomac River during the blue catfish spawning season. Out with one other co-worker, Branson was tasked with netting as many fish as he could for a diet study. After hitting the pedal to stir up the water, he witnessed a sight not soon forgotten. More than a hundred fish — most well over 20 pounds, with several exceeding 60 — immediately swam to the surface.

"It wore me out," he recalls. "I was probably netting fish for less than two minutes, but it was pretty intense."

Admittedly less exciting, though certainly no less important, is what typically happens next. Branson spends a significant portion of time, especially during winter, analyzing the collected data. While it's best to remove invasive species such as the blue catfish while fishing for fun, their residence in the Potomac is relatively new, and scientists need to learn more about them.

What are they eating here and how much? What's the population structure? Are there more young fish or old fish? Are they spreading? The answers to these

questions determine the necessary

management actions to ensure the river remains healthy for its native inhabitants and the surrounding ecosystem.

Filling another integral role, Branson also helps manage the tournament database for the Tidal Bass Program. To keep healthy stocks of fish, most tournaments follow catch-and-release practices. He attends many of the larger black bass events across the state to check that fish are being handled correctly.

"Black bass is an important sportfish in Maryland," he says, "and it's really rewarding to play a part in a fishery that means so much to so many people. People care deeply and are receptive to working with us to maintain and protect our fish populations. I love that."

Day in and day out, Branson exemplifies nothing but dedication and devotion to his state and its people. "Working for DNR is fun. I feel like I really make a difference, and the work I do matters." ■

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Lauren Dorrill is the Creative Services Manager in DNR's Office of Communications.



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